DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 104 EA 023 476

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TITLE Communication. Restructuring the Education System Series.
INSTITUTION Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colo.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM Distribution Center, Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202 (No. SI-91-5; guide $4.00; communications kit $20.00 plus $3.00 postage and handling).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Dissemination; Public Schools; *School District Autonomy; School Organization; *School Restructuring

ABSTRACT

Redesigning the education system to prepare citizens for the 21st century is a monumental challenge. To accomplish the job, understanding and support must come from people in all parts of the education system and community. Building support and understanding among various groups of people requires effective communication strategies and skills. Nine elements are outlined to form a basic communications plan for restructuring. They are: setting objectives; planning strategies; building support; describing the restructuring message; disseminating materials; using the media; showing progress; anticipating and responding to criticism; and evaluating. A communications kit entitled "Communicating about Restructuring" containing "how to's" and exmples of successful communication tools and tactics is also described in this guide. (RR)

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Restructuring the Education System

COMMUNICATION

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Commonly Asked Questions

1. What is restructuring?

2. Does restructuring change only teaching and learning?

3. What differences will I see in a restructured classroom?

4. Are fewer subjects taught in a restructured school?

5. Should schools offer fewer subjects?

6. How does the role of teachers change?

7. What happens to extracurricular activities and vocational education?

8. Does restructuring necessarily mean school-based decision making?

9. Doesn't trying to educate all students mean you're overlooking the average student and holding back the brightest?

10. Will schools need more money and staff?

11. How can you justify any increase in school budgets?

12. Can you prove restructuring will improve student achievement?

Why do we need a communication plan?

Redesigning the education system to prepare citizens for the 21st century is a monumental challenge. To accomplish the job, understanding and support must come from people in all parts of the education system and the community.

Building support and understanding among various groups of people requires effective communication strategies and skills. It requires an understanding that true communication is a two-way process — a balance of listening to what's important to others and presenting your ideas in ways that respond to their concerns. The communication strategy for restructuring the education system is not a method to manipulate others. It is a commitment to maintain honest, open dialogue and debate about what best meets individual student needs.

It begins with a communication plan that grows out of the following questions:

- What do people want students to know and be able to do?
- How do we talk about what we are doing?
- How do we listen to what others are saying?
- With whom should we be talking and working? How do we generate more support, both internally and externally?
- How do we anticipate and respond to questions and concerns about the changes we are making?
- What materials should we prepare to inform people about our efforts?
- How do we best reach people to tell them about what we are doing?

Getting Started

Begin by selecting a small communications team. The team could include people who are involved in the restructuring effort and have an interest and/or experience in communications. (A local public relations professional could be invited to sit on the team and provide pro bono consultation.) The most effective team involves a diverse group of participants, such as a teacher, administrator and parent for a school team; school board member, district administrator, principal and/or teacher and businessperson for a district team.

Communicating effectively about restructuring begins with a thorough understanding of what is meant by "restructuring" in your school, district or state. Once team members define restructuring, the team develops a communications plan that focuses and coordinates all communication efforts for maximum impact.

A basic communications plan for restructuring consists of nine elements:

1. **Objectives** — What do we want to accomplish?
2. **Strategies** — How will we accomplish the objectives?
3. **Building Support** — Which groups do we need to listen to and share information with about restructuring?
4. **The Message** — What do we want to say about the changes we are making at the school, district and state levels?
5. **Materials** — How will we get the message out?
6. **Media** — How do we talk about restructuring to the media? Can we get the media's help in carrying the restructuring message?
7. **Showing Progress** — How do we show that restructuring works?
8. **Anticipating and Responding to Criticism** — How do we deal with criticism?
9. **Evaluation** — How will we measure success in accomplishing our objectives?

By using a communication plan as a compass and road map, restructuring advocates can put into action the strategies and tactics that will reach key groups with clear messages about restructuring.

1. Objectives

Objectives should spell out what you want to accomplish through communications to support the school, district or state's vision of teaching and learning. Objectives might include: "To increase parent involvement in the school by 25%." Or: "To enlist the support of school board members as advocates for the district restructuring efforts."

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2. Strategies

Strategies describe the ways to reach your objectives. What vehicles will communicate and what methods will reach the people whose support or action is needed? For example, one strategy to reach the business community might be to prepare a videotape to be shown by selected individuals at meetings of local business organizations.

3. Building Support

Restructuring an education system depends upon support and participation from key groups. Building support begins by identifying key individuals and groups whose understanding and advocacy is vital to achieving change in the education system. These people become your network of supporters and advocates. For each group the communications team targets, a specific strategy must be developed which outlines:

- The information important to that group
- How best to communicate with that group
- What, if any, materials should be developed for the group

To learn what is important to each group, begin by LISTENING. Through strategies such as focus groups, polling and surveying, community forums and one-on-one meetings, you will learn what you need to know. The information you put together (the message) must be tailored to each group's specific needs and interests. For instance, to talk to businesspeople, you might want to describe the outcomes of restructuring in terms of what new and improved skills and abilities graduates will bring to the workplace.

Groups to consider targeting include those inside and outside the education system, such as school board members, teachers, parents, students, legislators, community opinion leaders and business people.

4. The Message — Describing Restructuring

Building support for restructuring the education system requires describing changes being made in the schools and at the district and state levels in concrete, understandable language. This means NO JARGON. While use of "educationese" is a logical shorthand for talking with colleagues and other informed groups, it's a barrier to understanding for those who do not work in education.

An effective description of restructuring begins with a focus on the results desired for students. How are the changes going to improve student learning? A list of "commonly asked questions about restructuring" and appropriate answers is helpful. (See box at left.)

5. Materials — Getting the Message Out

To reach key audiences effectively and efficiently, those responsible for communicating choose the communication tools best suited for the audience and the message. A range of materials can be considered, including fact sheets, brochures, newsletters, examples of restructuring schools (what will visitors to the school see that is different?), letters, videos of classroom activities and face-to-face communication.

6. The Media — A Special Audience

Because the media (newspapers, radio, television, magazines) reach broad audiences, they are vital to efforts to reach large numbers of people to explain the why and how of restructuring. In general, there are three opportunities to work with the media: when you bring a story idea or issue to them, when you contact the media to cover a specific event and when a reporter wants to do a story about changes under way in the schools.

Because a simple media strategy is an important part of restructuring efforts, you might want to use outside professional help.

Consider including these elements in the media strategy:

1. Develop a media mailing list.

2. Send news releases to announce events, report on progress and announce grants awarded to support restructuring efforts.

3. Invite individual reporters to schools that are restructuring so they can see the changes and talk to teachers, students and parents.

4. Develop a simple fact sheet that uses clear language and answers most commonly asked questions about changes under way.

5. Identify and train those individuals who can serve as spokespeople for the restructuring effort and be called upon for interviews.

(Excerpted from the proposed New Mexico communications strategy for restructuring)

I. Building Support

A. Identify groups you want to reach and develop strategies for reaching them. Audiences should include, but not be limited to, teachers, administrators, school board members, business representatives, media, legislators, governor's office, parents, other taxpayers.

B. Consider setting up focus groups. This is one technique for listening so you understand what's important to various audiences and what they need to know.

1. Identify groups to be brought together.

2. Select facilitators.

3. Train facilitators.

4. Hold focus groups.

5. Compile what is learned into an easy to-use short report.

C. Bring together ECS commissioners to communicate with them about restructuring. This both expands the circle of those familiar with your restructuring efforts and helps build a group of third-party advocates.

D. Make contact with, at a minimum, the following state organizations: New Mexico Alliance of Business, local and state chambers of commerce, New Mexico School Boards Association, statewide school administrators' organization, New Mexico PTA and New Mexico's AFT and NEA affiliates.

About the Authors

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The ECS offices are at 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427; 303-299-3600.

It is the policy of ECS to take affirmative action to prevent discrimination in its policies, programs and employment practices.

This publication was funded in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

For more information about **Restructuring the Education System**, see the other publications in this series: *Keeping the Promises of Reform: A State Strategy* (SI-91-2), $4; *A Consumer's Guide* (SI-91-4), $8; and *Building Private Sector and Community Support* (SI-91-3), $4. Additional copies of this report (SI-91-5) are also $4. The set of 4 publications is $15 plus $3 postage and handling. To order publications or get more information on restructuring, contact the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202; 303-299-3600.

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Keeping the media informed will help individuals report fairly when approached by those critical of the restructuring efforts.

7. Showing Progress — Measuring the Success of Restructuring

One of the first things people ask about restructuring is: "Does restructuring work?" Those responsible for communicating about restructuring at the school, district or state level need evidence that changes made in the education system are having the desired impact. Progress can be shown in various ways, including:

- Improvement in test scores
- Statistics about students, such as dropout rates, attendance, drop in disciplinary actions
- Anecdotal information from teachers, students, administrators, parents

8. Anticipating and Responding to Criticism

People who disagree philosophically with restructuring are entitled to their opinions. Some critics intentionally distort facts because they want schools to reflect their values, not those of the majority. Others, however, simply lack sufficient information to understand restructuring and what it means in terms of their own interests.

Criticism can be minimized by communicating clearly, by keeping people informed and by building support among key audiences. But, any communications strategy should acknowledge and include steps to listen and respond to criticisms and concerns that will be expressed periodically.

9. Evaluation

Understanding how effective communications efforts are and what changes should be made requires evaluating success or failure as you go. For example, to evaluate a videotape presentation to a business audience, place a brief survey on tables at the business meeting to determine what the audience got out of the presentation they saw. If you've sent legislators materials, give them a phone call to ask whether they have any questions; this will tell you whether they've read the materials and find them helpful. By reviewing the results of communications efforts and regularly fine-tuning your methods and actions, you will be sure that your communications approach effectively builds understanding about and support for your restructuring efforts.

For More Help

A communications kit, *Communicating About Restructuring*, and accompanying workshop were developed by ECS staff who have broad knowledge of communications theory and experience in communications practice. The authors also provide communications training for people in schools, districts, states and the communities served by restructuring efforts.

The kit contains how-to's and examples of successful communication tools and tactics. The examples are drawn from restructuring schools, districts and states across the country. The workshop is tailored to each group of participants and offers step-by-step training in planning and carrying out a communications strategy.

Workshops are suitable for schools, districts or state departments of education that want to provide in-depth communication training for staff, colleagues and/or the community at large. To obtain further information about this ECS workshop and kit, or general advice on the need to and ways to communicate, contact Marjorie Ledell or Arleen Arnsparger at ECS, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202; 303-299-3600.

To order a kit, send $20 plus $3.00 postage and handling to the ECS Distribution Center at the above address; 303-299-3692.

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